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SUBJECT: PLANS FOR A "DEMOCRACY COUNCIL" OF NGOS BEGIN TO
FIRM UP

REF: A. BAKU 60
[1](#)B. BAKU 1488

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ANNE E. DERSE PER 1.4(B,D).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Nearly a year after human rights activist Arzu Abdullayeva shared initial plans to create a coalition of democracy-focused NGOs with then-DRL A/S Lowenkron, she has begun to take actions to make the "Democracy Council" a reality. However, rather than the coordination mechanism between NGOs that Abdullayeva initially envisioned, the group appears to be made up primarily of Baku's intelligentsia and experts on selected topics. Abdullayeva's efforts remain nascent, and an original supporter, presidential hopeful Eldar Namazov, has now apparently backed out. Abdullayeva maintains that the group behind the "Democracy Council" is distinct from the European Integration Committee (an NGO) and from Namazov's presidential campaign, but given heavily overlapping membership, the lines between the three organizations remain somewhat blurred. Given strong personality differences and weak structures, efforts to unite Azerbaijan's notoriously fractured NGO community likely will continue to flounder. END SUMMARY

[1](#)2. (C) In a December 2006 meeting between human rights activists/NGO leaders and visiting former DRL A/S Lowenkron, human rights activist Arzu Abdullayeva shared early plans to create a national democracy coordination group of NGOs (ref a). The USG welcomed the proposal as a step to encourage Azerbaijan's fractured NGO community to unite in a joint effort around a common agenda. The group later became known as the "Democracy Council," and was raised in each session of the high-level bilateral democracy dialogue between then-A/S Lowenkron and Foreign Minister Elmar Mammadyarov. The USG encouraged the GOAJ to support and work with this and other civil society groups promoting democratic reform in Azerbaijan.

[1](#)3. (C) Over the past year, Abdullayeva has conveyed mixed sentiments about progress in establishing the Democracy Council and the difficulty of marshaling the fractious Azerbaijani NGO community into a single, unified group with a common agenda. In July, noting that she "didn't have time" to move forward with the group, she asked Turan News Agency Director Mehman Aliyev if he would be interested in taking charge, but he also did not have time. In September, Abdullayeva outlined more concrete plans, stating that the group would be made up of Baku's intelligentsia and experts, who would form smaller committees divided by topics. Rather than coordinating activities, the committees would examine problems -- ranging from the media situation to the lack of city planning in Baku -- and develop a set of recommendations to present to the GOAJ.

14. (C) In a December 6 meeting with the Ambassador, Abdullayeva gave an update on plans to create the Democracy Council. She described the Council as a grouping of intellectuals, including government officials, who seek "reform of society" in several spheres: political, economic, social, culture, the Nagorno Karabakh conflict, and the environment. The Democracy Council will be organized into groups based on these themes and, led by prominent experts in each of these areas, will conduct regular roundtable discussions. Through these roundtable discussions, the Democracy Council will develop proposals for democratic reform in each of these areas, which they will present to the public and invite comment from the government. Abdullayeva said that the Democracy Council was open to members of all political parties, although representatives from the ruling Yeni Azerbaijan Party likely "won't be accepted by other members." Abdullayeva repeatedly asked the Ambassador for her guidance on when she should launch the Democracy Council; she also asked whether the U.S. would be able to offer any financial support for the Democracy Council. The Ambassador noted that the decision to launch the Council was up to Abdullayeva and the other organizers. While the U.S. wants to help strengthen civil society in Azerbaijan and supports the idea of further NGO coordination, she said, this is an NGO initiative, not a USG initiative.

15. (SBU) Abdullayeva noted that the European Integration Committee, an NGO in which she plays a leading role, is a completely separate organization from the Democracy Council. She admitted that there was a great deal of overlap in the two coalitions, membership and said she had faced some criticism for creating yet another NGO coalition. Abdullayeva also stated that there is absolutely no link between the Democracy Council and the "Citizens' Charter," launched November 21 by independent presidential hopeful

Eldar Namazov (ref b). Abdullayeva said that she had discussed the Democracy Council concept with Namazov months ago and he made it clear that he was not interested in participating in the venture. Abdullayeva acknowledged that she personally supported Namazov's political ambitions and was present at the November 21 launch of Namazov's "Citizens' Charter," adding that she believes Azerbaijan needs to develop "real alternatives."

16. (C) In a December 12 meeting with Poloff, Namazov said that he had been one of the original activists behind the idea of the "Democracy Council," an idea which he said has been floated around for more than two years. He confirmed Abdullayeva's statement that the "Democracy Council" is entirely separate from his "Citizens' Charter" movement (and eventual presidential campaign), although he estimated the supporters of the "Democracy Council" and the "Citizens' Charter" overlapped by 90 percent. Namazov explained that two years ago, he would have dedicated "all of his time" to create such a council, but with the October 2008 presidential election rapidly approaching, he now cannot afford to lose the time he needs to work on his campaign.

17. (C) In addition to the demands of his campaign, Namazov said that he is not currently working on the "Democracy Council" concept because he does not believe it is an opportune time to kick-off such a group. He sees a major potential problem: that the GOAJ will artificially accept the group's recommendations in the immediate run-up to the elections, pretend to work with the group, and then abandon any semblance of progress after President Aliyev is re-elected. Namazov pointed to what he believes to be similar failures by the Press Council and by the GOAJ-NGO working group on political prisoners. He said that if the group moves forward to create this council, the best time will be after the 2008 election. "But they have my support in spirit," he concluded.

18. (C) COMMENT: Azerbaijan's NGOs are notoriously fractious and personality-driven, negatively impacting their ability to coordinate and limiting their effectiveness. For example, Azerbaijan's political prisoner situation has drawn increased

international attention in recent months, but domestic NGOs cannot agree on how to define the problem, including the criteria to determine who is a political prisoner, and which NGO should take the lead in addressing this issue. As a result, multiple lists of "political prisoners" are circulating through the international community, making it difficult to assess the real situation and address the problem. Despite the great need for a more active and effective civil society to spur Azerbaijan's democratic development, efforts to create real coordination among Azerbaijan's NGOs are likely to continue floundering. The GOAJ claims that its new NGO Council (septel) is designed to spur growth of civil society, but it will be some time before we can assess the results of this effort.

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